

Most of Martin Hengel's books, whether long or short, are marked by a strict unity of subject matter. This one is different. Not that it lacks order and unity; it is impossible to imagine its author writing in a disorderly way. But it could easily have been made into two books. There are in fact three parts. The first deals with "History writing in antiquity and in earliest Christianity"; the second with "The decisive epoch of the History of earliest Christianity: the development of a world-wide mission" – this is a study of Acts 6 - 15; the third may be said to return to the first under the heading "Historical methods and the theological interpretation of the New Testament". It is not hard to see the unity in all this. Dr Hengel is concerned with the early history of Christianity, the history reflected – whether trustworthily or not – in the pages of Acts; this leads him to consider Acts as a historical work in the light of and in relation to other histories, and theories of history writing, current in the same period, and to ask how the method or methods of historical criticism, used in the study of ancient history, bear on the theological content, and the means of eliciting the theological content, which Christians may expect to find in Acts as in the other books of the New Testament. This means that though the book is short a serious review ought to be fairly long.

It is clear that Dr Hengel embarks on his work in a polemical spirit. He does not approve of the way in which some of our colleagues work on the primitive Christian texts. "Radical criticism, which in the end leaves us with nothing for real historical thinking, especially as it is often followed not so much by an honest 'we do not know' as by wild reconstructions" (p 40). Those who practise such criticism often seem to be unaware of the nature of the sources which all ancient historians have to use, and of the fact that the earliest Christian history is better attested than almost any comparable ancient movement. They wrongly suppose that there were "laws of oral transmission", and forget

that even legends and "ideal scenes" may have historical value. Early Christians were interested in remembering, and did remember with some success, the story of Jesus and of the early days of the church.

On the whole, Dr Hengel proves his point. It may be that he sometimes overplays his hand. There are parallels between the stories of Jesus and of the apostles and parts of ancient literature that Dr Hengel discounts, such as the life of Apollonius and the romances. And I find it difficult to agree that John maintained his non-synoptic chronology simply because he believed it to be chronologically right, and not because he thought his version theologically significant (p 19). But Dr Hengel has rightly seen that, on the whole, when the New Testament writers narrate events they do so in the belief that the things they describe happened. This does not mean that they did actually happen, but it is fair to say that if a reasonably intelligent man sets out to tell a true story about real people what he says will not be without some contact with the truth.

After Part I the unthinking reader might expect that he will read in Part II a conservative account of the Acts narrative of the earliest years of the church. It is true that Dr Hengel does believe that Acts can be used for historical as well as theological purposes, but this belief does not carry with it an affirmation of Luke's narrative as it stands. Thus, for example, "Not a single word [in Paul's letters] points to the existence of the 'apostolic decree'; either he did not know it or, as seems to me more probable, he showed by his rejection that he ignored it" (p 117 f). Here especially it would be as interesting (to the reviewer) as it is in fact impossible to go over Dr Hengel's work line by line, noting many agreements, and some disagreements, regarding, for example, the relation of the Hellenists to the teaching of Jesus and the identification of Paul's opponents in 2 Corinthians with representatives of a mission sponsored by Peter. But Dr Hengel's learning and acute insight mean that he must always be taken seri-

ously and respectfully.

Part III is set out in the form of a number of brief theses. It is to be hoped that Dr Hengel will expand them into a book. He is aware of danger on two sides, On the one hand there are those who acclaim "the historical-critical method" (as if there were only one!) and suppose that this is the only treatment the New Testament calls for. On the other hand there are those, both radical critics who think that there is no history in the New Testament and conservatives who will not even discuss questions of historicity, who are interested in

nothing but "theological interpretation". Against both, Dr Hengel says "Theological exegesis', which thinks that it can 'interpret' the New Testament without the application of the relevant historical methods, is not only deaf to the question of truth but is also in danger of distorting what the texts say and falling victim to docetic speculation" (p 134f). With this, and with practically everything else in Part III, I agree heartily.

No one, I think, is likely to read this book quickly; the time taken in reading it slowly is well spent.

C. K. BARRETT

CATHERINE OF GENOA: PURGATION AND PURGATORY AND THE SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE trans and ed by S. Hughes with an introduction by B. J. Groeschel (*The Classics of Western Spirituality*). SPCK 1979 pp xvi + 163 £4.80.

Although she died in 1510 and did not write any books, we can get unbearably close to St Catherine's tormented life. Her mysticism emerges from immense natural and spiritual tensions and dislocations, all somehow held together in God as her being was dismantled and purified, detaching her from whatever fulfilment she might reasonably have expected. An aristocratic woman trapped in an unhappy marriage, even the conversion of her dissolute husband and the subsequent self-sacrifice of their care for the sick and wretched of Genoa brought no easy resolution.

The *Spiritual Dialogue* is in three parts, compiled by more than one person and it is an uneven blend of dialogue, meditation and narrative. In a curious way, the defective literary structure conveys something of the fragmented human experience involved here. The multiplicity of intentions and styles, as well as the dialogue-form expressing the various facets of St Catherine at odds with one another ('soul', 'body', 'human frailty' etc.), vividly render her struggle for Christian wholeness without imposing a false or premature coherence. Dennis Potter once remarked that despair made elegant cannot shake the mind with the brute force of the orig-

inal scream. With St Catherine, both Body and Soul waited to see the workings of God, which increased their joy and suffering. Fittingly it is St Catherine, or rather the work drawing on her and entitled *Purgation and Purgatory*, that offers what is easily among the best accounts of Purgatory, that troubled moment of purifying love in the soul's journey to God. Only those familiar with the other expositions of the doctrine can fully appreciate, by way of contrast often, the merits, beauty and dignity of her insights into the bitter-sweet reality of purification after death, whereby God's forgiving love integrates a penitent's disjointed life.

The translator has done well, except that he frequently omits or telescopes phrases. The introduction will not replace the classic studies by von Hugel and Umile Bonzi, either in terms of scholarship or of sympathetic penetration, and they are at their weakest when explaining St Catherine's teaching on Purgatory or locating it in tradition. But then for such a task, contemporary Christian culture provides few resources and little incentive.

ROBERT OMBRES O.P.

SONS OF THE PROPHETS: EVANGELICAL LEADERS OF THE VICTORIAN CHURCH by Michael Hennell SPCK, 1979, pp 147, £7.50.

Mr Hennell's book deals with six of the more or less 'liberal' (in theological out-

look) leaders of Anglican Evangelicism in the generation after Simeon and Wilber-